

How to Job Search as a Mid-Career Professional

The New Rules for Determining When and How to Switch Jobs

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“How do I know when it’s time to leave my current company and how do I find my next position?”

As a mid-career professional, you’ve climbed the ranks to mid-management and are now considering what’s next. Will your current company be where you break into the C-suite in a role like CTO, CMO or CFO? Or, are you missing out on skill growth and promotions by continuing to stay?

If you’ve been with your current company for three years or longer, it’s natural to wonder what’s next, especially if you feel like you’re stagnating in your current role. The decision to leave, however, is not an easy one. Technology advancements have changed the job search and hiring process, and you’ll need to get up to speed quickly on new best practices for today’s competitive market, including online resume submission via applicant tracking systems (ATS). Jumping ship for another firm can also feel risky and could backfire if the economy dips or your new company falls on hard times. However, if you are no longer learning new skills or advancing through promotions, continuing to stay in your current position could be just as damaging for your career.

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While moving to a new company may not be as extreme as a total career overhaul, it can still be a difficult and confusing process. Before heading back into the job market, you’ll need to take practical steps like updating your resume and LinkedIn, as well as engaging in a careful evaluation of your professional goals. Preparation and reflection are key: the more time you put into laying the groundwork, the easier your transition will be. From evaluating your options to starting the job search, this guide is designed to help you navigate the mid-career transition process.

How to Decide When to Leave Your Current Company

For some professionals, the decision to leave their current company is crystal clear. A toxic workplace culture, company performance problems or a sinking industry are all compelling reasons to get out as quickly as possible. But for many others, the decision is more difficult. Loyalty, close co-worker relationships, and even a fear of job hunting can cause smart, talented professionals to stay put. If you are not sure if you should stay or go, carefully consider your professional trajectory.



Start by asking yourself these questions:

1. Am I learning new skills?
2. Do I feel challenged or excited by my current role?
3. Am I on track for future advancement opportunities?
4. Is senior management turning over and creating room for upward mobility?

If the answer to one or more of these questions is “no”, it’s time to consider alternate pathways through a measured and intentional job search.

Start by reflecting on your current professional situation. Are you frustrated with your clients, your co-workers or your company’s leadership? Perhaps you’re seeking a company with greater work-life balance or maybe you need more meaningful work. Or, maybe you’re feeling disengaged and need a new challenge. These desires could be incompatible with other goals, like company prestige or compensation packages, so it’s important to candidly evaluate your reasons for making a change.

One of the most common reasons for mid-career professionals to change companies is because they’re feeling “stuck” at work. In fact, more than half of Gen Xers, who comprise the majority of mid-career professionals, report being disengaged at work, according to [Gallup](#). A further 19 percent are “actively disengaged”. [Jim Harter](#), Gallup’s chief scientist for workplace management and well-being, says these mid-career professionals feel “stuck in neutral” as their junior colleagues zip along. Although the mid-career slump cuts across industries and income levels, Harter notes that college-educated employees report greater professional unhappiness. Harter hypothesizes that “highly educated people have higher expectations, and may, therefore, find career disappointments more bitter.”

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The desire for more meaningful work is also a driving force for many mid-career transitions. “When people get to their mid-career phase, they want to give back and do something meaningful,” says Philip A. Pizzo, the director of Stanford’s program, the Distinguished Careers Institute, tells [The Atlantic](#). The process of finding more meaningful work is not always smooth, however. Pizzo cautions “People become anxious and just start doing things that are not connected... just to feel like they are contributing.”

If you’re disengaged at your current job or seeking more meaningful work, switching companies may provide new opportunities for professional growth, advancement, and fulfillment. However, you may find yourself just as frustrated if your expectations do not align with your new reality. Taking time for candid reflection before starting the job search is critical. You do not want to go through the process of switching companies only to be just as dissatisfied with your new job.

Finally, it’s important to consider the timing of your change. Market dynamics may be outside your control, but they can have a major impact on your transition mobility. Failure to fully understand the market could lead to unrealistic



expectations or even cause you to overlook new opportunities. As you evaluate potential companies, consider how these companies fit within the current marketplace. Are these companies in growth mode or reacting to market pressures? Are they highly specialized or do they offer a broad range of general services? Take time to understand your personal preferences and current market direction, and adjust your search trajectory accordingly.

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How Technology is Changing the Job Search

Jumping back into the job market can be a challenge. Even if it's only been a few years since you landed your last job, the rapid pace of technological advancements and recruitment processes are impacting job search strategy— and you'll need to get up to speed quickly if you want to remain competitive. The Dutch-British company Unilever, for example, is experimenting with Artificial Intelligence (AI) to recruit and sort job applicants— no resume required. Goldman Sachs and the Walmart-owned Jet.com are both reportedly leveraging AI as part of their recruitment process, according to [Wall Street Journal](#) reports.

Many large companies now pre-screen candidates via applicant tracking systems (ATS). In some cases, these systems will auto-populate information directly from your LinkedIn profile. Other systems require you to upload a resume. This resume submission technology doesn't always work as smoothly as it should, however, so it's important to be up-to-speed on best practices so your resume doesn't get overlooked.

Even as companies move to use technology, like AI and ATS, to streamline their candidate search process, job seekers in some industries, like Accounting and Finance are finding that the search process is actually getting longer. While companies are still open to hiring, many are moving slowly due to economic and budgetary concerns. Marketplace strength varies regionally. In Washington, D.C. where I am based, for example, candidates who anticipate a six-week search process are surprised when the process may take 10 weeks or even longer. Due to the high-cost of a bad hire, companies are involving more decision makers in the candidate interview process, hoping to minimize their risk of making a mistake. A full understanding of regional market trends, opportunities and risks will help you best position your skills and experience and set appropriate expectations for the search.

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Finally, as you prepare to re-enter the job market, don't overlook the challenges of searching for a new position while you are currently employed. Even telling colleagues that you're considering a transition – and asking them to keep an eye out for new opportunities – could backfire. You'll need to be discreet in your search process and avoid raising any red flags with upper management.



5 Steps to Start Your Job Search Today

Here's how to start a strategic job search that reflects the realities of today's job market and the latest job search technology:

1. Maximize your impact on LinkedIn.

LinkedIn is still ground zero for networking and candidate searching. In all likelihood, recruiters and hiring managers are looking for someone with your specific expertise and skill set right now— can you be found? Build a strong brand and take control of your professional story.

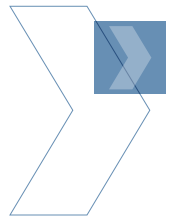
- **Benchmark accomplishments against the industry.** For LinkedIn (and your resume), include personal success metrics and broader company metrics, too. For example, “uncovered a new cost saving measure” is a fine accomplishment, but these savings would be more impressive if we knew that expenses at other leading companies *increased* during the same period. “Identified cost saving measures that resulted in a 4.7% expense decrease compared to an industry-wide 5% increase,” tells a more impactful story.
- **Write a benefit driven headline.** Don't waste valuable LinkedIn real estate restating your current company title. Instead, succinctly communicate your unique value add for your future employer. Why should a company hire you? How will you make a difference for their business?
- **Master keyword search.** Include relevant industry keywords in your LinkedIn headline, job title, and summary.
- **Show career trajectory.** Don't leave a hiring manager guessing about your job progression. List previous positions within your current company, responsibilities and key project outcomes. How quickly did you earn a promotion or take on new responsibilities? Benchmark against typical company promotion pace, especially if you advanced more rapidly.

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2. Optimize your resume for online submission

Many large organizations now rely on applicant tracking systems (ATS) to pre-filter resumes, outright rejecting any that don't include the right keywords or are formatted improperly. Unless you have an inside referral, your resume may never get read by a human. Here's how to get past the screeners:

- **Use the right formatting.** Still submitting PDF versions of your resume? While this may have been a best practice several years ago, many online application systems struggle to parse PDFs correctly and may miss important content. If you're submitting a resume through an applicant tracking system rather than emailing someone directly, use a Word Doc or Rich Text format.
- **Include the right keywords.** ATS software scans resumes for contextual keywords and phrases, scoring the



resumes for relevancy. Only resumes with the highest scores make it through to the hiring manager. So, how do you know which phrases are most relevant to your position? Start with the job description and identify the essential keyword phrases listed in the requirements or skills section. Next, consider how to naturally integrate the most important phrases into the qualifications summary at the top of your resume. Finally, cover your bases and include both the full title and acronym when listing positions. For example, if you're a CPA, list your job title as Certified Public Accountant (CPA).

- **Customize your resume for the position and company.** You don't need to completely redo your resume for every application but a few tweaks can help your resume get through the computer scanners and into the hiring manager's inbox. Always ensure your resume shows a clear match between your skills, experience and the position. Add a custom headline that integrates relevant keywords for the position. Include any recent industry certifications and reorder bullets to highlight achievements most relevant to this position.

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3. Focus on value-based networking

From LinkedIn optimization to AI recruiting, technology may have upended the traditional search process, but the value of real, offline connections has never been more important. An internal referral can help you bypass the online submission process and ensure the right person reviews your resume.

- **Reconnect with former colleagues and mentors.** If you've lost touch with a former co-worker or supervisor, reaching back out after a long absence can feel awkward. It doesn't have to be. When you reach out, don't dwell on how long you've been out of touch. Instead, keep the focus on what you've both been doing and why it would be great to meet up. For example, "I was so pleased to see you pop up on my LinkedIn this morning with the news of your new venture. I saw you're working on a new project that crosses over with my current work. If you have time, I'd love to take you to coffee and learn more about your approach."
- **Be strategic about networking events.** Conferences and networking events are a dime a dozen these days— which are actually worth your time? As an established professional looking to make a career switch, aim for networking events that balance your "bonding capital" and "bridging capital". "Bonding capital" refers to relationships based on commonalities. These are typically relationships with co-workers and industry peers. "Bridging capital" refers to relationships built across differences, like disparate industries or professional skill sets. A good balance of both is important for the job search.
- **Bring value.** As you reach out to old connections and make new ones, it's easy to let your desire for a new position cloud your conversations. Be sure to keep the value on the long-term relationship, not on the transaction. Approach every conversation from the mindset of "How can I help this person?" rather than "How can this person help me?" – even if you're asking for career advice or an internal referral.

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4. Leverage recruiter partnerships.

An experienced industry recruiter can help you bypass online job submission forms and get your resume in front of receptive hiring managers. Recruiters can also help prepare you to navigate the new interview process and even minimize the need for online tests and video interviews.

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- **Proactively create opportunities.** Rather than reactively responding to job openings, a recruiter evaluates your unique skill set and experience. Recruiters consider which companies would benefit most from your skills, and refine their search accordingly. In some cases, a recruiter might even work with a company to create a position that's tailored to fit your skill set and meet a new company need.
- **Search discreetly.** By letting a recruiter know you're open to new possibilities, the recruiter can keep an ear to the ground and let you know about positions that align with your search criteria. Recruiters are on the pulse of the industry and often the first to know about a position, long before a job is even posted on LinkedIn.
- **Receive objective advice.** An experienced industry recruiter will serve as a sounding board for your job search, providing candid advice on everything from company reputation to promotion prospects.

5. Prepare for the new interview process.

If it's been a few years since you last interviewed for a job, you may be surprised by just how much the interview process has changed. Previously, companies had their hiring manager conduct a short, qualifying phone interview and then set up several rounds of in-person interviews with the team. Now, candidates may face multiple virtual interviews and tests before ever receiving an in-person interview invitation. Some companies are also using AI to analyze everything from word choice to micro-gestures in these candidate tests and video interviews. As more companies turn to predictive algorithms and machine learning to identify the best job candidates, this technology is fundamentally altering the interview process— and you need to be prepared.

- **Familiarize yourself with the technology.** While a technical glitch may not be your fault, it won't paint you in the best light, either. If you do not use videoconferencing technology on a regular basis, conduct a few practice rounds first. Check your surroundings: how will a background appear on the screen? Master the basics: how can you quickly mute/unmute your microphone during the interview? Aim to speak in clear, measured, and even tones. Record yourself and play back the practice interview: how do you sound?
- **Adjust your body language.** Maintaining strong eye contact is an in-person interview best practice that does not translate well to video interviews. Instead, practice looking directly into the video camera. You won't technically be looking into a person's eyes on your end, but it will appear that way from the interviewer's perspective. Finally, watch your hand gestures; natural gestures can appear overly dramatic and distracting on a video screen.



Transition Challenges: Navigating a Down Market and Making Time for the Job Search

In some cases, you may find that you're ready to leave your current job but external factors outside your control, like a down market, are making this departure difficult. In other cases, you may be open to a new position, but demands from working 50+ hours a week at your current job leave you with little time to actively search. Don't fallback on complacency; you can still proactively position yourself for success. Here's how:

1. Problem: down market restricts mobility.

Start by covering the basics: keep your LinkedIn and resume up to date, network with colleagues, and stay on top of industry news. Next, focus on what you can control at work and proactively look for opportunities to add value to your role. If you're experiencing high turnover at your firm, for example, you may have the opportunity to step into a new leadership position or assume new responsibilities.

Employers love to see a candidate with a demonstrated track record of success in challenging work environments. When the market shifts, you'll have valuable experience that will make you a more attractive candidate.

2. Problem: no time for the job search.

Feeling squeezed between professional and personal demands? Setting aside several hours each week to comb through job postings and submit resumes is not a wise investment of what little free time you have. Instead, let a recruiter do that hard work for you.

Recruiters have a wealth of market intelligence: they know which companies are looking to hire, which skill sets and experiences are most in demand, and how much companies are willing to pay for top talent. Use this insider knowledge to your advantage. Your upfront time investment is minimal: spend a few minutes to optimize your LinkedIn profile and you'll start getting recruiter calls almost immediately. Listen to their messages and call back recruiters who have interesting opportunities. Even if the opportunity they present doesn't match your current goals, let them know what it would take (salary, responsibilities, location, etc.) to consider a switch. They'll keep an eye out for the right position— all with no time investment required from you.

Keep your LinkedIn and resume up to date, network with colleagues, and stay on top of industry news.

Next Steps: Proactively Taking Control of Your Professional Trajectory

Landing your dream job in 2018 requires a different approach than what worked just three years ago. Rapid technology advancements, evolving professional demands and recent market volatility are profoundly impacting professional trajectories and rewriting the rules for a successful job search.

While every career path will look slightly different, successful mid-career professionals have several things in common. They develop sought-after

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leadership skills, build strong networks, and optimize their LinkedIn profile for maximum impact. They stay ahead of the technology curve and understand how to use online resume submissions and virtual interviews to their advantage. They strategically leverage the benefits of recruiter relationships, working with recruiters to find the best opportunities on their behalf and using recruiters' market place intelligence to inform their next move.

Most importantly, successful professionals resist complacency and create opportunity by proactively taking control of their professional trajectory.